Pressing the point of local printmaking

Printmaking has been considered an "undervalued" art form, but an exhibition celebrating 50 years of the Sydney Printmakers Collective tells a different story.

Jane Lee

Both Eastern and European cultures share a long history of printmaking practices. Beginning with the discovery of prehistoric relief's in China, then later woodblock prints in Japan, the simultaneous development of textile prints in Europe can be seen documented as early as the 6th century.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the impetus of new inventions like wood engravings, lithography and other mass production technologies saw printmaking enter a new paradigm. For the first time in history, affordable and portable images would be accessible to the wider public.

Since then, ensuing possibilities for the spread of knowledge and ideas have continued to expand at an astounding rate. In the 21st century, a large portion of our daily lives involves the assimilation of multiple mass-produced images. Yet for all the far-reaching capacity to multiply images, in the world of Fine Arts at least, many artists continue to look back and re-examine the special qualities of printmaking and its manual processes.

Sasha Grishin, the Sir William Dobell Professor of Art History at ANU and a print specialist, describes printmaking as an "adventurous art form".

Speaking at an anniversary exhibition of works from the independent collective, the Sydney Printmakers, at the Manly Art Gallery, Professor Grishin said printmaking "was the first to embrace the printing press in the 15th century, the first to embrace lithography in the 18th century, the first to embrace photography in the 19th century and the first to embrace digital technologies in the 20th century".

"This remarkable ability to constantly reinvent itself has ensured its continuing relevance and vitality," he said.

It is 50 years since the Sydney Printmakers' conception and the Manly Art Gallery and Museum is celebrating by hosting the Printmakers' latest collection of art works. The *Hot off the Press* exhibition will include the art of its current 56 members, covering a diverse range of the more traditional linocut, lithography, screen printing and etchings, plus new expressions of the mono, inkjet and digital print practices.

Compared with our overseas counterparts, the recognition of Australian printmaking as a legitimate and profitable practice has been a relatively slow process. Curator of Manly Art Gallery Therese Kenyon describes Australian print works as "undervalued".

"Printmaking is perceived differently overseas, as it is an ancient art form in China and Japan, and is readily accepted in Europe," she told *The Epoch Times*.

Making reference to a recent survey of audience perceptions of art, Ms Kenyon reveals: "Eighty per cent of our audience believed that oil painting is the highest form of art. Therefore, this would assume that the hierarchy of painting, sculpture, prints, photography, ceramics, textiles etc, still remain in some sort of order in people's minds. However, contemporary art uses all of these techniques, plus digital technology as well."

In an effort to counteract these longstanding misconceptions, a collective of both emerging and established print making artists formed the Sydney Printmakers.

Bound by a devotion to the continued promotion and practice of printmaking, the group has attracted countless artists, from its early founders who included Margaret Preston, Earl Backen, John and Barbara Coburn, Eva Kubos and Elizabeth Rooney.

While staying true to the intimate processes involved, the Sydney Printmakers pride themselves in incorporating a variety of experimental techniques. In this way, they hope to encourage a shift in thinking about print from a medium valued for its reproductive capabilities to a medium capable of fostering innovative artistic expression.

The diversity of exhibits on show at the Manly gallery not only demonstrates the group's ability to adapt their skills to suit varied artistic sensibilities, but also establishes print as a distinctive, collectable art form, available to a new and growing audience of art collectors.

"The rarity of artists' proofs begins to mimic the rarity of a painting as an original and unique work of art, which allows the price to go up, as if in competition with painting sales," explained Ms Kenyon.

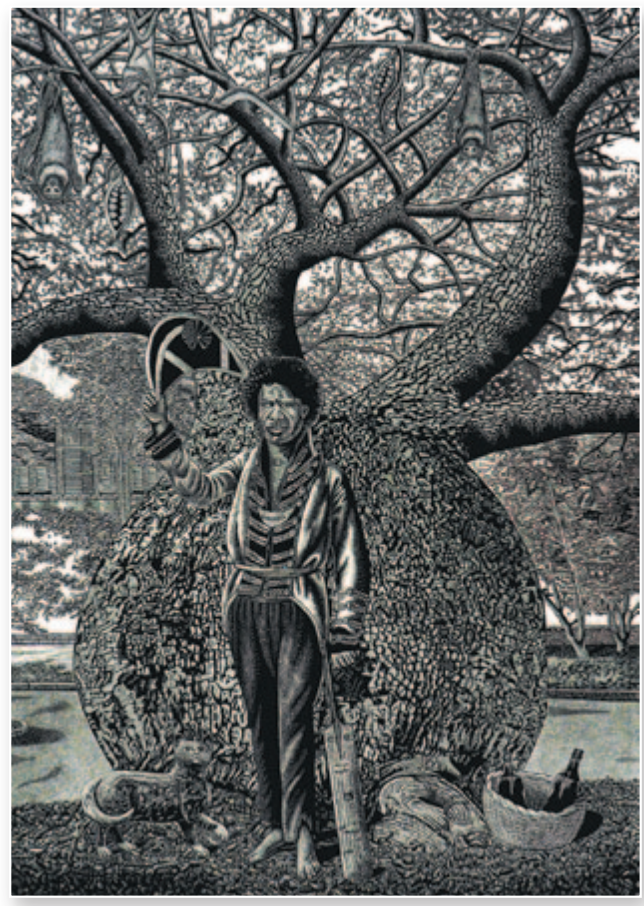
Professor Grishin described the latest exhibition as a "report card on the state of printmaking in Australia".

He commented that the "perceived minority status of the art form" had encouraged the printmaking collective to "band together with a sense of messianic zeal". Without that, he noted, "Sydney Printmakers would not exist."

Although working in prints carries a long tradition of well-rehearsed and practised techniques, for the contemporary artist, working alongside new technologies, printmaking continues to present logistical challenges. It does, however, also allow former traditional art forms to break into new avenues of artistic expression.

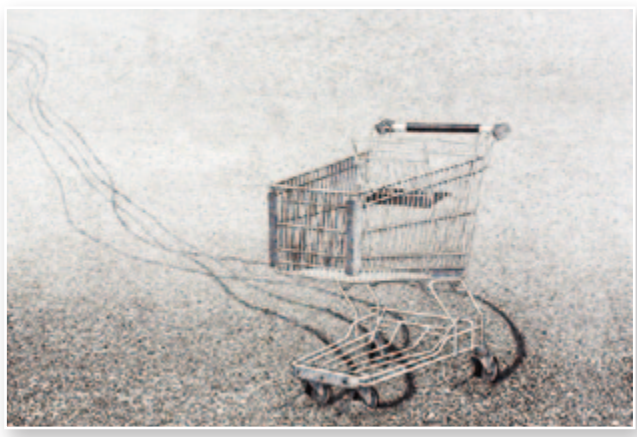
The group exhibition will run until Aug 28, 2011.

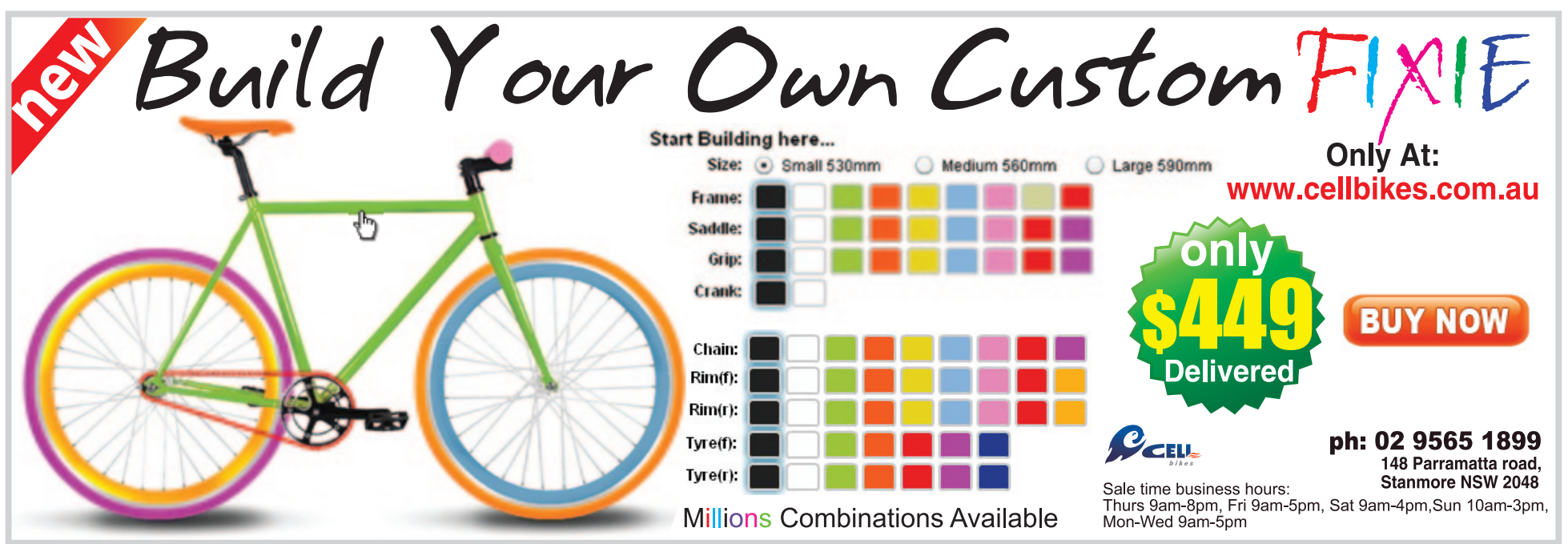
For further information, visit www.manly.nsw.gov.au/gallery.



MANLY ART GALLERY

Rew Hanks, *King Bungaree and the Bottle Tree*, Linocut on BFK Rive, artist proof, 100 x 71cm.



Michael Kempson, *Safeway*, etching and aquaitint on Velin Arches, edition 25, 50 x 63cm.
In *Safeway*, Michael Kempson's etching deals with the subject of urban debris. "*His narratives are never as simple as they first appear. They are more like allegorical fables, even sermons, but ones which touch on the very essence of our existence.*"-Professor of Art History Sasha Grishin.

Edith Cowlishaw, *Nightfall*, etching on BFK Reeves, edition 6, 18 x 50cm.
Edith Cowlishaw's ephemeral landscape drawing *Nightfall* provides a good example of the light and delicate technique that imitates the rendered fluid lines of a sketch.